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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how to create appropriate and well-planned learning activities for lower level, mostly adult, English-as-a-Second-Language students. The paper offers a step-by-step narrative on preparing a class to go to the computer lab, introducing them to and explaining the uses of basic computer components, and then leading them in a variety of very simple but pedagogically useful exercises. The point is made that many, if not most or even all, of these students cannot afford a computer at home, so that this may in and of itself be a useful exercise in acquainting them with this increasingly pervasive technology. Learning English is, of course, the top priority, but understanding and learning about the multiple uses of a computer is a close second. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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BUT TEACHER, I CAN'T TYPE!

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Introduction

ESL teachers are finding increasing opportunities to use computer technology with their students as it becomes more widely available in education settings.While some teachers debate the value of taking lower level ESL students into a computer lab, this group can benefit greatly from appropriate, well-planned activities. The keys to success are in thoroughly preparing students for the experience, in designing activities that are both interesting and highly communicative, and in addressing the varying degrees of keyboard competency of the class.

Thorough Preparation

Before even setting foot in the computer lab, there are a number of things that you can do that will make life much easier. First of all, review the alphabet. This sounds very basic, but remember some lower level ESL students may have just learned the English system and the order of the letters, so the review will be a reinforcement. Remind students about the upper and lower cases, and the basic use of capital letters, e.g. in names, and at the beginning of sentences.

Some students, perhaps the older ones, will feel some trepidation about their visit to the computer lab, so it might be a good idea to let them interview one another and realize that they are all in the same boat. The handout can include questions such as, *Do you have a computer? Do you know anyone who has a computer? Can you type? What other machine can you operate?*

At this point give students a handout with an illustration of a computer and use this to introduce them to these vocabulary items - screen, monitor, mouse, wire, connection, hard drive and keyboard. This can be a dictation, or an information gap activity. Tell them that they have to click the mouse, and demonstrate click and double click. A bell where a button has to be pressed can be passed around so that students can try for themselves the hand movements required. Remember when you tried the

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mouse for the first time how difficult it was to maneuver it!

The next step is to give a handout with an illustration of the keyboard. Go over the sequence of the letters on the keyboard, and show the students where the numbers are. Teach the vocabulary that they will have to understand - space bar, shift, delete, return, arrows, drag, up, down, left, right, hit and press. Give students plenty of time to look at the keyboard diagram, to absorb the information and ask questions. A pair activity using prepositions could be useful. One student asks, *Where is the letter G?* and the other replies using a preposition.

It's very important to make no assumptions about the students' knowledge of vocabulary. For example, when using the word *hit* as in *hit the key*, explain the meaning. Students may know *hit* only in one context and be puzzled by its use in the computer lab setting! The same thing applies to *drag*. The whole computer experience can be very frustrating if the mouse isn't dragged properly, so demonstrate the meaning of the word by using a heavy piece of furniture, and comparing *drag* with *lift*.

If there are more students than computers in the lab, have them choose a partner while they are still in the classroom. It's possible to insist that they choose someone who speaks a different language, so that they would have to communicate in English and have a very authentic language experience. On the other hand, some teachers might feel, as we did, that they are going to do something very new, and they will have to sit with this student the entire time that they are in the lab. They might be more comfortable facing all these challenges with a partner of their own choice.

In spite of all the pre-teaching, some students will become completely helpless when confronted by the actual machine. It gets easier as the days go by, but be prepared for a lot of individual teaching.

First assignments in the computer lab

When taking low level ESL students in to the computer lab, there is a tremendous feeling of excitement and a lot of noise. They all want to start immediately and do all the amazing things that they know computers can do. Some of them do not want to wait for instructions, so they get into a program that they cannot handle, or worse have the screen freeze up. The biggest challenge for teachers is to temper the

enthusiasm with what they need to learn. On the first day, some teachers find that it makes a lot of sense to go into the lab before the students do and put the mouse on top of the monitor. This way the students have to listen to the teacher, and hopefully they will all then begin at the same time.

If a projector is available, ask the students to watch a demonstration and then do the same. If not, write down on the board or OHP the steps that they have to follow. Decide before going to the lab whether students will have disks, or just work on the hard drive. Obviously instructions are going to differ depending on that decision. It is a good idea to use a mouse tutorial to introduce students to dragging and clicking. If this software isn't available, use the calculator on the computer for mouse practice. This also reinforces the use of prepositions.

The activities at this level are very simple. Ask the students to type the alphabet in the lower case, and then in the upper case. To do the latter, they will have to learn the use of the caps lock key. They can type the lower and upper case letters with a space in between, so that they have to use the space bar, Aa, Bb, Cc. Dictate letters that they have to type, capital B, small d, etc. Numbers can also be dictated.

Ask students to type their name and the country that they come from. Teach them to highlight this and then change the font and the size of the type. This is not easy as the students find the highlighting very difficult. Spell out a list of words, C-O-M-P-U-T-E-R. Tell them to number the words and use the return key so that the words are in a list. Write on the board a few sentences with very obvious spelling and grammatical mistakes, and show the students how to correct the errors. This is quite difficult for those who are still having problems manipulating the mouse, so be prepared to move around and help students. However, it is a worthwhile activity as it shows students the editing capabilities of the computer.

When students become more comfortable with their computers, it's possible to move on to more challenging activities.

Communicative Activities

Computer lab settings can create a negative effect of isolation as students focus on their monitors. When tasks are not carefully designed, computers can create

barriers. Maintaining the communicative aspect of lessons is essential. Two activities that require students to share their computer writing in the lab are *Describing the Computer Lab* and *Expanding Student Writing*.

Describing the Computer Lab

1. Have students open a new document, put their names at the top, and write one sentence describing the lab. EX.: *There are 30 computers in the lab.*
2. Have everyone stand up and move one computer over to the right.
3. Read what is written on the computer screen. Add another sentence to the list with new information describing the lab.(Note: this is a list, not a paragraph.)
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 ten or more times.
5. Have students return to their original computers.
6. Options: (in the lab or for homework) Have students correct the sentences, OR have them use this brainstorm list to write a paragraph describing the lab.

Note: The computer lab is the first, obvious place to begin in writing description. Students can also describe posters on the wall or photos in their textbooks, as long as they are all looking at the same image.

Expanding Student Writing

1. Have students open a new document, put their names at the top, and write a short paragraph about their activities of the last (or next) weekend.
2. Have everyone stand up and move to a different computer, preferably at some distance from the first one.
3. Read the paragraph on the screen.
4. Below the paragraph, write some questions about the information asking for more details. EX.: If the paragraph says that Student A went shopping, Student B might ask questions with *Who, What, What time, Where, Why, How much*, etc.

5. Have students return to their original computers.

6. Have students rewrite their paragraphs adding the information asked for in the questions.

7. Option: The process can be repeated a second time.

Another way to increase communication in a computer lab setting is to do activities in chat mode. A conventional group activity such as answering questions in a group (ie: *Who has lived in the U.S. the longest? Who lives the farthest from school?* etc.) can be done in a chat group. This gives the students valuable practice in computer skills. It also eliminates many affective barriers to communication, such as difficulty in pronunciation. Chat format is available in various software programs, or can be downloaded from internet e-mail providers. Actual chats can also be printed out and used later for editing practice.

Accommodation of Different Computer Skill Levels

In any ESL classroom, the degree of expertise in keyboarding and computer skills will vary widely from those who cannot type at all to those whose skills may well exceed the teacher's. It is crucial to create tasks that keep *all* students feeling interested, active and successful, whatever their level of expertise. A useful technique to cope with the varying keyboard competencies is to make flexible assignments that expand or contract to suit the skills of the student.

A typical assignment might be to first copy a paragraph provided by the teacher on a handout. For example, a paragraph titled *Last Weekend* gives a short description of the teacher's activities. The title is in boldface. The verbs are in italics. The teacher provides font, spacing, and size information. Initially, the students' first step is to reproduce the paragraph exactly as they see it on their own computer screens. For some students with low keyboarding skills, this task will require the entire class period. They will finish, print their work and turn in a satisfactory product they can be proud of. Others will finish more rapidly. As they do, they will raise their hands and the teacher will work with them individually to give them step 2 of the assignment. These students

will copy the paragraph on their screens, change the title to *Next Sunday*, and make all appropriate verb changes. For students who finish this step, have them copy the paragraph again, change the title to *Every Sunday*, and change the verbs again. For students who finish step 3, have them use the paragraph as a model to write about their own weekends. In this way, the assignment can expand to keep those with higher computer skills challenged. The point is that *all* students will produce a finished product according to their abilities.

Another useful method to keep keyboard-competent students occupied is to turn them into classroom assistants. Teaching their computer skills to fellow students is great English practice and highly communicative as well.

Conclusion

Research has shown that low-income families are not keeping pace with the technological advances that the rest of the population has taken for granted. Many of our ESL students cannot afford to buy a computer, and many of them are in low paying service jobs where there is little chance of them getting to use one. The ESL school or college may be the only educational establishment that they have any connection with. Therefore, it is imperative that in the safe, comfortable environment of the ESL classroom we introduce our students from the very beginning to the technology that is all around them. Learning English of course is the top priority, but understanding and learning about the multiple possibilities of the computer should be a close second.

The authors teach English as a Second Language to adult students at City College of San Francisco.